

### **A brief guide to writing papers**

You want to PEE:

Present

Explain

Evaluate

Note: presenting is not the same as explaining.

## **Active and Passive Euthanasia**

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### **Terminology**

**Euthanasia:** for reasons of compassion, either performing or refraining from performing an act that results in the death of a person.

#### **Active vs. Passive**

- Active Euthanasia: Performing, for reasons of compassion, an act that results in the death of a person. (e.g., giving a lethal injection)
- Passive Euthanasia: Refraining from performing an act, for reasons of compassion, that results in the death of a person. (E.g., refraining from initiating life-sustained treatment; refraining from aggressive efforts at resuscitation)

#### **Voluntary vs. Involuntary vs. Nonvoluntary**

- Voluntary Euthanasia: Euthanasia performed with the patient's consent.
- Involuntary Euthanasia: Euthanasia performed even though the patient withholds consent.
- Nonvoluntary Euthanasia: Euthanasia when the patient is unable to either give consent or withhold consent (e.g., an infant, someone in a coma)

### **Rachels' argument against the standard view**

#### **The Standard View**

- (1) Active euthanasia is never permissible.
- (2) Passive euthanasia is sometimes permissible.

**Rachels' Thesis:** The Standard View is wrong. If passive euthanasia is sometimes permissible, then active euthanasia is sometimes permissible.

### **Incurable Cancer case**

Imagine the following circumstances: A patient is dying of incurable cancer of the throat, and is in terrible pain, which cannot be satisfactorily alleviated. He will die within a few days, even with treatment. If he asks his doctor to withhold treatment, and his doctor does so, he will die after only a day of pain and suffering. If he asks his doctor to give him a lethal injection, and his doctor does so, then he will die after only a few minutes of pain and suffering.

### **Rachels' Argument for voluntary euthanasia**

- (1) In those circumstances, the considerations that support voluntary passive euthanasia are the following:
  - (a) Doing so would be in accordance with the patient's wishes
  - (b) Doing so would alleviate the patient of needlessly suffering terrible, agonizing pain.
- (2) But those same considerations also support voluntary active euthanasia. (Indeed, they provide better support for voluntary active euthanasia.)
- (3) And in those circumstances, there is no difference between the considerations against voluntary passive, and voluntary active, euthanasia.
- (4) Hence, if voluntary passive euthanasia is permissible in those circumstances, so too is voluntary active euthanasia.

### **The killing/letting die objection to Rachels' argument**

Premise (3) And in those circumstances, there is no difference between the considerations against voluntary passive, and voluntary active, euthanasia

The objection: premise (3) is false. Active euthanasia involves killing the patient, whereas passive euthanasia only involves letting the patient die. Killing someone is, in and of itself, worse than letting someone die. Hence, the considerations against active euthanasia are stronger than the considerations against passive euthanasia.

### **Rachels' rejoinder: consider two cases**

1. Smith stands to gain a large inheritance if anything should happen to his six-year-old cousin. One evening while the child is taking his bath, Smith sneaks into the bathroom and drowns the child, and then arranges things so that it will look like an accident.
2. Jones also stands to gain if anything should happen to his six-year-old cousin. Like Smith, Jones sneaks in planning to drown the child in his bath. However, just as he enters the bathroom Jones sees the child slip, hit his head, and fall face down in the water. Jones is delighted; he stands by, ready to push the child's head back under if it is necessary, but it isn't. With only a little thrashing about, the child drowns all by himself, "accidentally," as Jones watches and does nothing.

### **The argument from the two cases**

- (1) If killing someone was, in and of itself, worse than letting someone die, then in any two cases exactly alike except that one involves killing someone whereas the other involves letting someone die, what the agent who kills someone does is worse than what the agent who lets someone die does.
- (2) The Smith/Jones cases are exactly alike except that one involves killing someone whereas the other involves letting someone die.
- (3) But what Smith did was no worse than what Jones did.
- (4) Hence, killing someone is not, in and of itself, worse than letting someone die.

### **The cause of death objection to Rachels' argument**

Premise (3): What Smith did was no worse than what Jones did.

The objection: premise (3) is false.

- Active euthanasia involves the doctor's being the cause of the patient's death, whereas passive euthanasia does not, for the illness is the cause of the patient's death.
- Being the cause of death is bad and hence, the considerations against active euthanasia are stronger than the considerations against passive euthanasia.

### **Rachels' rejoinder**

Being the cause of death is bad only in those circumstances in which death is a great evil compared to the patient's continued existence.

But in circumstances in which passive euthanasia is permissible, death is not a great evil compared to the patient's continued existence.

And so, in those circumstances, the fact that active euthanasia involves the doctor's being the cause of death is not bad.

### **An objection: Rescue 1/Rescue 2**

Rescue 1: There are five people drowning in a lake on the east side of town. You are the only one that can save them. If you save them, then you will have to let one person die, a person who was drowning in a lake on the west side of town. You choose to save the five and let the one die.

Rescue 2: There are five people drowning in a lake on the east side of town. You are the only one that can save them. If you save them, you will have to kill one person, an old lady who is crossing the street. You choose to save the five and kill the one.